UNITED NATIONS

E

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
LIMITED

E/CN.4/1996/NGO/19
21 March 1996

ENGLISH ONLY

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Fifty-second session
Agenda item 18 of the provisional agenda

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECLARATION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF INTOLERANCE AND DISCIMINATION BASED ON RELIGION OR BELIEF

Joint written statement submitted by Franciscans International, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocesan Council of North and South America, the International Association for Religious Freedom (category I), the Baha'i International Community, the Christian Peace Conference, the Church World Service, Inc., the Coordinating Board of Jewish Organizations, the International Catholic Union of the Press, the Lutheran World Federation, Pathways to Peace, Pax Christi International Catholic Peace Movement , Pax Romana, The Salvation Army, the Temple of Understanding, the World Conference on Religion and Peace, the World Council of Indigenous Peoples, the World Jewish Congress, the World Student Christian Federation (category II) and the Gray Panthers, the International Humanist and Ethical Union, the Third World Movement against the Exploitation of Women, the World Christian Life Community and the World Union for Progressive Judaism, non governmental organizations on the Roster.

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[23 February 1996]

We, the undersigned non-governmental organizations, recommend that the United Nations General Assembly designate an annual International Day for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

The 15th anniversary of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 25 November 1981 as Resolution 36/55, will occur during the 51st Session of the United Nations General Assembly. The Declaration, in its preamble, describes religion or belief as "one of the fundamental elements . . . of life . . . that should be fully respected and guaranteed."

In recommending designation of an International Day for Freedom of Religion or Belief to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, we express strong support for the work of the Special Rapporteur on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Professor Abdelfattah Amor, who again reports to this Session of the Commission on Human Rights. For the past ten years, ever since the Commission on Human Rights appointed the first Special Rapporteur on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, the Special Rapporteur has found, examined, and recommended remedial measures to address incidents inconsistent with the Declaration. Through his efforts, many critical instances of suffering and persecution have been brought to the attention of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Further and wider attention to his work would help significantly in defending and realizing the rights of all to adopt and practice freely held religion or belief.

An International Day for Freedom of Religion or Belief could help in realizing some important ideals expressed during the International Year of Tolerance, observed in 1995. The designation of an International Day for Freedom of Religion or Belief also follows appropriately from three relevant and important initiatives:

1. The United Nations Seminar on Encouragement of Understanding, Tolerance and Respect in Matters Relating to Freedom of Religion or Belief, held in Geneva during 3-14 December 1984 recommended, in paragraph 258 of its Report, that:

"Religious bodies and groups at every level have a role to play in the promotion and protection of religious freedom or beliefs. . . . Inter-faith dialogue based on the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief should be pursued at all levels. . . . The Seminar also recommends that the text of the Declaration be disseminated . . . and that religious bodies consider recommending a common day of prayer or dedication to the aims set out in the Declaration."

2. The Special Colloquium on Religious Liberty and Human Rights Between Nations, in Nations and in Religions, held in Haverford, Pennsylvania during 3-8 November 1985 and attended by theologians representing five of the world's religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism, recommended in paragraph 259 of its Report that:

"4. The United Nations General Assembly should declare 25 November as the "Day of Religious Freedom" in order to celebrate the day on which the 1981 Declaration was adopted and in order for it to act as focal point and a stimulus for educational and promotional activities in support of the Declaration."

3. In the 1989 Report on Elimination of All Types of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief the Special Rapporteur of the Sub-commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Elizabeth Odio Benito, recommended in paragraph 260 that:

"260. The day of prayer and day of dedication to the aims set out in the 1981 Declaration, recommended by the United Nations Seminar held in December 1984, could well be 25 November, as urged by the theologians who met in Pennsylvania. The General Assembly should adopt such a course, but the Special Rapporteur would add the recommendation that 25 November should be declared by the General Assembly as the "Day for Freedom of Religion or Belief" so as to bring it more into line with the spirit of the 1981 Declaration." (emphasis added)

Annual resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly on the Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance have repeatedly recognized that human rights cannot be guaranteed and protected by legal means alone. Promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief deserves wide public recognition and active support.

Educational, promotional and public information activities related to the many urgent issues on the UN agenda have helped significantly in promoting public awareness and in motivating vigorous initiatives which have resulted in important moves toward major efforts to address critical needs presented by United Nations instruments.

Designation of an International Day for Freedom of Religion or Belief by the United Nations General Assembly would help to inspire widespread actions by governments, religious bodies, educational institutions and other non-governmental organizations to promote universal rights to hold and to manifest freely chosen religious convictions or conscientiously-held beliefs as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

We urge the Commission on Human Rights to consider adopting a resolution calling for the observance of an International Day for Freedom of Religion or Belief.